CHAPTER VI

Demography and Familism

OF the demographic phenomena the small farmers present, the decline of population is most easily isolated. The facts are as follows: There has been a continuous and characteristic decline since the great famine of 1845. Numbers have fallen from 6,548,000 in 1841 to 2,963,000 in 1926. With the exception of Dublin, the whole of the country has suffered in this decline. On the whole, however, the country districts have suffered at a greater rate than have the towns. In 1841, 80 per cent of the population was rural; today only 63 per cent. In other words, since 1841 there has been an almost continuous increase in the town population at the expense of the rural, though the two have shared a common decline. Put in terms of percentages: since 1841, the country districts have lost 64 per cent of their population, towns from 200 to 500 49 per cent, towns from 5,000 to 10,000 25 per cent, and towns other than Dublin over 10,000 13 per cent. Dublin, on the other hand, has gained 47 per cent. That the enormous emigration associated with this decline is a matter of the contemporary generation is evident when it is recognized that 30 per cent of the native-born Irish were living in other countries in 1926.

The closest approach among European countries is the case of Norway, where 15 per cent live outside. Italy, which has provided so many citizens for the United States and the

1:Arensberg & Kimball E-5 (1932-1934) 1940
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The interlocking net of roads covering Clare high and low must have been fairly complete at an early period. In high country many of the roads were "famine roads," built to give relief during the "bad times." In lower, richer land they are older. They ran originally from one concentration of estates to another, reflecting the older social order. Even today there is still a considerable amount of new road building carried on by local authorities, opening up districts which formerly had little or no communication with the outside world. There are still many farmhouses and village clusters of farmhouses far away from any improved road in higher country. Their inhabitants rely on rough borheens and stony trails leading from the nearest road. Many such isolated houses were originally built in inaccessible parts of hills and bogs to keep their owners from the eyes of bog rangers and estate stewards and to hide them from the threat of eviction.

Today the roads are kept up by the county government and the state. The system of road labor is very old. Private contracts for stones, maintenance, and repair and gang work under county officials are still important sources of outside work for the farm communities and occasions of local relief important in county politics.

The small farmer today uses five principal methods of travel. Choice among these is determined by the nature of one's errand and the status of the traveler.

The motor car is the newest and most costly method of transport. Small farmers do not own motor cars. They hire them from the towns when occasion arises. The motor car is still in process of introduction into the Irish Free State. In the countryside it is used only in time of crisis and high ceremony. If a member of a farm family needs hospital attention, he is removed to the nearest hospital, either in a private motor car or in the free county ambulance. At a wedding and an important funeral a family may engage

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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and feathers', or explosives is a comparatively recent development. These methods took a heavy toll of the megalithic monuments of granite-quarrying districts such as the Mourne Mountains in the nineteenth century, though superstitious tales are still told of the misfortunes which befell the stone-workers.

Another type of stone ditch popular in the limestone plain of east Galway is curiously similar to the Scots Galloway dyke and may well have been introduced by improving landlords or their agents. The lower portion of the ditch is a dry wall of small stones about two feet high carefully levelled on top, and on this rests a wall of boulders of lace-work type two or three feet high. The heavy superstructure not only secures the lower part with its weight but, perhaps because of its slight overhang and tottering appearance, is said to deter cattle and sheep from approaching the wall (Fig. 35). The low walls of loosely piled

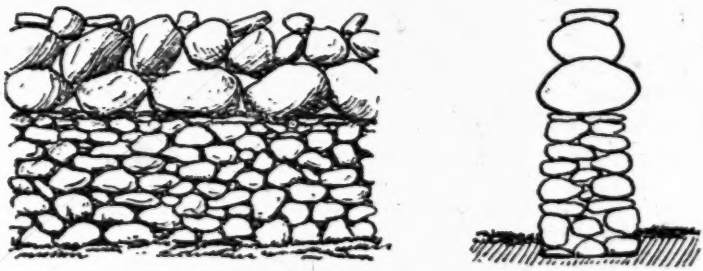

FIG. 35. East Galway ditch of Galloway type, and cross-section.

stones on Rathlin Island are said to act as a deterrent on the principle of the modern electric fence: I was told that animals give them a wide berth once having learnt that they collapse almost at a touch. At the other extreme are the ten-foot walls which run for miles around many demesnes, isolating them physically from the surrounding country so that only at the entrances or the now numerous gaps does one get a glimpse of the decayed grandeur inside. A good many of them are 'famine walls' built to relieve distress during famine years, in return for a meagre allowance of food and a wage of perhaps a few pence per day.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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WEDDINGS AND WAKES

582 178 ●731 776 THE average age of marriage among Irish countrywomen, about 28, is said to be higher than in any other country in the world: that of the men is higher still, and in addition there are many who never marry. These are among the demographic consequences of the economic and social changes which followed the Great Famine of 1845–47, for down to that time the mass of the population had nothing to lose and everything to gain by marrying young. Among the economic factors which led to the postponement of marriage may be mentioned the rising standards of living, the prohibition of the subdivision of holdings so that only one son could inherit, and the need for larger farms consequent on the decline of subsistence farming and the increase of pastoral husbandry, which meant that the peasant had to look and plan ahead. Equally important, I believe, was the effect of the crisis of the famine in breaking down patterns of behaviour which had continued with little change since prehistoric times. The elder faiths were rudely shattered so that today we have only the broken remnants left, stray survivals which have lost their meaning in a modern setting. The scattering of the fairy hosts is the constant lament of old people for whose parents they were a reality. Over large parts of the country, down to famine times the fairies (among them the ancestral spirits), and the powers of nature in sun and stone, tree, flower and welling water were ruling forces whose malice must somehow be averted, and whose beneficence must be courted by magical acts. Nature's reproductive surplus on which [842] human life depended could best be assured by breeding children to capacity.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
ER6 Rural Irish ER6

XXI

OLD PISHROGUES

AMONG the serious nineteenth-century students of Irish folk-life a Dublin surgeon, who is perhaps better known as the father of Oscar Wilde, deserves special mention. Sir William Wilde was not only a frequent contributor to the learned journals but he found time to compile a pioneer catalogue of the Irish antiquities now housed in the National Museum of Ireland. His very active life spanned the Great Famine, and the monumental report on the *Tables of Death* which appeared as Vol. I of Part 5 of the Census of 1851 was largely his work. In it he dwells on the shattering effects of those tragic years, 1845–47, on the immemorial customs and natural poetry of the Irish peasants: 'The closest ties of kinship were dissolved; the most ancient and long-cherished usages of the people were disregarded; the once proverbial gaiety and lightheartedness of the peasant people seemed to have vanished completely, and village merriment or marriage festival was no longer heard or seen throughout the regions desolated by the intensity and extent of the famine.'[1] Another observer noted that the traditions of hospitality were weakened greatly and that padlocks made their first appearance at this time.[2]

Wilde observed that the coming of the railway at about the same period was a contributory factor in the change because it worked to a time-table—more or less—and involved an artificial division of the day instead of an observance of the signs of nature changing with the seasons. Time was related to social activity and had different values at various seasons of the year.

[1] *Census of Ireland* (1851), I, Part 5 (1956), 242.
[2] A. M. Sullivan, *The New Ireland* (1877), 65.

14: Westropp B-4, 5 (no date)1910-12
ER6 Rural Irish ER6
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Griffin, of men starting seaward to reach its fairy shores, and never returning. 773

Another magic island was Kilstuitheen, or Kilstuiffen, in Liscannor Bay. On the southern shore, in 1839, there was said to have been an ecclesiastical city swallowed up by the earthquake that split Innis Fitae into the present three islands,[84] which suggests derivation from O'Conor's then recent version of the various Irish Annals. On the northern shore the tradition was fuller. Kilstuitheen sank when its chieftain lost its golden key in battle, nor will it be restored until the key is recovered from its hiding place, some say, under the ogham-inscribed gravestone of "Conan" on Mount Callan. (When that place was dug out only bones and rusted iron were found.)[85] The island, with its golden-roofed palaces, churches, and towers, may at times be seen shining far below the waves, but once in seven years it rises above them, and those who see it then are said to die before its next appearance. The fishermen

> "point how high the billows roll above lost Kilsafeen,
> Its palaces and towers of pride
> All buried in the rushing tide
> And deep-sea waters green."[86]

Comyn, in *The Adventures of the Three Sons of Thorailbh* (1750), connects it with the raid of Crochaun, Dahlin, and Sal in the time of Finn and their defeat of Ruidin, Ceannir, and Stuithin. Legend near Lehinch places the battle at Bohercrochaun. A pretty legend in 1878 told how those rowing over the sunken island smell the flowers of its fields through the waters.[87]

[84] Annals of Ulster, Clonmacnoise, and the Four Masters; *Ordnance Survey Letters*, (Co. Clare), vol. i., p. 304.

[85] *The Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, ser. ii., vol. i. (1872), pp. 269 *et seq.*

[86] *Monks of Kilcrea.*

[87] *Ordnance Survey Letters*, (Co. Clare), vol. i., pp. 300-4, vol. ii., pp. 74, 99; *Handbook to Lisdoonvarna* (1896), p. 64; *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. xxx., p. 289; *Journal of the Limerick Field Club*, vol. iii., p. 197, where I have collected the materials at some length. Other sunken monasteries and churches are alleged at Monaster Letteragh, off the coast of Mayo, and the Castillons' Church in Ballybeigue Bay in Kerry. I do not regard the story in the *Irish Penny Journal*, vol. i., p. 362, by J. Geraghty MacTeague, as anything but a work of fiction; it is very artificial,

14: Westropp B-4, 5 (no date)1910-12
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placed on the new coffin. Where burials take place at short intervals the results are best left untold, but such cases are rare. A consequence of this fearful overcrowding is that no old graveyard is free from coffin planks and plates, bones, and fragmentary or whole skulls.[10] Those who saw Quin "Abbey" before 1879 will remember the enormous heap of skulls, (even then, however, much diminished), heaped round a tree near the graveyard gate. At Tomfinlough the bones and skulls were neatly stacked in a recess, at Kilmacreehy they were heaped on a sort of side altar in the chancel, and in other churches (Coad etc.) I have seen single skulls staring out of holes in the wall.

Places for the burial of strangers and unbaptized children are common, and are usually *killeens*, old forgotten church sites, sometimes in a fort, sometimes at a well, or unenclosed in a field.[11] Those at Kilquane, near Ennis; Fomerla, near Tulla; Kyleeine, near Barefield (with Doughnambraher stone); and Kilvoydane, near Spanail Hill, have basin stones. Some *killeens*, such as that between the forts of Mortyclogh, near Corcomroe Abbey, and that at Fortanne, have crept back into favour for adult burial, but several ancient churches at which bones are found have not been so used in traditional memory (*e.g.* Toomullin, Crumlin, Killonaghan, and Kilbract, round Lisdoonvarna; Templeline, in Carran; Temple-an-aird, near Carrigaholt; St. Senan's, on Mutton Island; Temple aed O'Connell, near Ruan; and several churches on Scattery and Iniscaltra). The church of Kilcashen was not remembered to have been a burial place before Eugene O'Curry's grandfather, Melachein O'Curry, in a pestilence about 1760, charitably collected the deserted unburied corpses "on carts and sledges," and buried them at the ruin on his farm.[12] Bodies were similarly buried during the Great Famine at the Lisheen, near Lough Fergus. Oughtdarra, near Lisdoonvarna, has the remains of a church of St. Sinnach MacDara,[13] where children under seven

[10] See also vol. xxii., p. 56.

[11] For a list, with notes, see *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. vi., ser. iii., p. 139.

[12] Kilcashen, *Ordnance Survey Letters* (Co. Clare), vol. i., p. 369.

[13] A saint famous all round Galway Bay, but not found in the ancient Calendars. Some suppose him to be a Fox Hero, *i.e.* Sinnach mac Dara, Fox

16:Messenger E-4,5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
(1959-1960) Inis Beag

The castle and watch tower still dominate the Inis Beag skyline, and the latter serves as a landmark for fishermen posting their nets. Another landmark, at the southeast tip of the island, is a 110-feet-high lighthouse built during the 1850s.

Written sources and local traditions disagree as to the effects of the great famine on Inis Beag. Some observers claim that the potato blight completely destroyed island crops, and the folk were forced to depend on secondary agricultural commodities, livestock, fish, and limpets in order to survive; conversely, others maintain that the blight did not penetrate the island until much later. According to my Inis Beag respondents, the blight did contaminate some gardens, but enough were spared so that the islanders were not greatly inconvenienced. In fact, potatoes were exported by some farmers to help feed starving mainlanders. Between 1841 and 1851, the population of Inis Beag increased by 62 persons, at a time when most other Irish communities had dwindling populations. The first record of substantial emigration from the island, mostly to the United States, was in 1822.

Contemporary Setting

Inis Beag has a northeast to southwest topographical axis, at right angles to its geological axis, and is a mile and three-quarters in length and a quarter of a mile less in width. A population of 350 persons inhabits four villages, and the island comprises 1440 acres. When giving directions informally, the folk refer to the beach side as the north side and the back of the island bordering the Atlantic as the south side; then, the sound separating Inis Beag from Inis Thiar becomes the west side, and the sound between Inis Beag and the mainland the east side. I will follow this practice when describing various geographical and other features in this chapter. Between the mainland and Inis Beag, a reef extending from the island far out into the east sound is a menace to shipping; it was on this reef within 200 yards of the shore that the freighter ran aground in 1960.

A large beach and a contiguous stretch of common land, which together make up over 200 of the island's 1440 acres, dominate the north side of Inis Beag. The beach is known as the "strand," following English usage, and lies west and north of the common land, about midway between the sounds (see Figs. 4, 9, and 10). It is thought that several hundred years ago arable land existed where the common land does today, and the strand was very narrow; but gradually sand accumulated, widening the beach and burying more and more farm land as it crept eastward. If one examines the Ordnance Survey Maps of 1841 and 1902, the slow encroachment of the sand can be noted. The common land was about half its present size in 1841, and 60 years later almost 70 acres of cultivable soil had been engulfed. The tops of fences projecting above the surface at the present time attest to the shifting of the sand, as does the buried church of the patron saint, and sand now threatens fertile plots on the east side of the island.

There are six major and several minor terraces in Inis Beag, of which the lower two underlie the strand, the common land, and two of the four villages. The lower terraces are broad and the upper ones narrow and precipitous, while weather-

16:Messenger E-4,5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
(1959-1960) Inis Beag

241 soil covered. There was little "field-making" at the beginning of this century, and
• [731] few plots south of the terrace crest were utilized for farming. Fields on the terraces were planted yearly with potatoes and other vegetables, but in the 1920s the "eelworm" parasite invaded the island and forced the present custom of
[659] fallowing plots for at least four years. This development necessitated the creation of new fields at the back, and when the government began to subsidize field making during the 1930s, and fence construction later on, another impetus to the manu-
[114] facture of additional land was provided. Most of the literature pertaining to Inis Beag, influenced by nativism and primitivism, claims that field and fence building has proceeded for centuries (even millennia) and disavows the existence of indigenous soils.

221 The year in Inis Beag commences in February with the advent of spring,
222 when seaweed is gathered, fields are manufactured, and crops are planted. Although
241 some seaweed is collected in the summer and autumn and stored in "cocks" near the shore or in outbuildings for later use, most of it is cut and pulled in January
[133] and February at the time of spring tides. There is a maximum 15¾ feet difference between flood and ebb spring tides in Inis Beag, and normally submerged reefs rich in seaweed are bared three to four hours daily for two or three days twice each month. The men await a "good strand" to gather seaweed, when the tide is lowest during the daylight hours and not influenced by wave or swell action, for this is a dangerous task which sometimes demands wading in water thigh deep. The folk are amused greatly by a sequence from a noted film about them depicting a woman carrying seaweed along the coast during a raging storm; the footage was created by the producer to satisfy esthetic canons and to portray the primitive and Celtic virtues.

241 The generic term for natural fertilizers is "manure" and includes seaweed, compost, and guano. The islanders also use chemical fertilizers to some extent, particularly in areas where soils are deficient in manganese. Compost varies much in composition and may include human and animal feces, called "dung," turf ashes, and decaying vegetable matter, such as ferns and the sod "scraws" of thatched roofs
[514] being dismantled. Nowhere in the literature is the use of human manure mentioned, and the folk are extremely secretive about its use, as they also are about burning cow dung for fuel in times of emergency. Their reticence about disclos-
[654] ing these practices is a product of sexual puritanism. Young farmers are more willing than their elders to follow the advice of the Department of Agriculture agent stationed in a neighboring island, and are coming to use chemical fertilizers more commonly than was the case in the past. The islanders eschew artificial commodities which impinge on the human body, and often I have heard chemical fertilizers denounced because they supposedly are manufactured from "bones of evil persons buried in cemeteries" on the Continent, or victims of the plague centuries ago. Some farmers hold artificial fertilizers to blame for both the potato blight and the eelworm parasite.

824 Four kinds of seaweed are utilized by the folk: ribbon weed, string weed or sea thong, red or May weed, and black weed or bladder wrack. The most commonly used variety is red weed, once the major source of kelp, which is washed in
[437] the year around and is stripped of its leaves when collected. Its stems are known

16:Messenger E-4,5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
(1959-1960) Inis Beag

partners to come to Inis Beag to confer with him, knowing that they were ill with influenza, which resulted in a serious outbreak of the disease shortly afterward. A fire which broke out in a storage room next to the house of the king some months after the shipwreck was viewed by irate islanders as divine retribution for his "greed and selfishness."

In Ireland, the term "gombeen" is used to demean the usurious shopkeeper, but this word is directed against the king only by those who most dislike him, and then to connote what they consider a combination of piety and avarice in his behavior rather than his economic practices. His role as moral guardian, with frequent instruction and reprimand as to manners and misdemeanors to men in the pub and children visiting the shop, is deeply resented by many. He does not care to have women make purchases in the shop, where they can observe men drinking and be observed in turn, ostensibly on moral grounds; he urges that children do the marketing instead, not for the convenience of their mothers, it is said, but because he can overcharge and short-change them more easily. To dissuade women from shopping, he reads out their lists and talks with them about family affairs in a loud whisper, so that they have no privacy. The men complain not only of his alleged practice of overcharging and short-changing them late at night when the pub is overcrowded with "light headed" drinkers, but also of his criticizing their actions in public, his frequent closing of the pub before midnight, and his refusal to serve those whom he feels have "taken too much" or those about to attend a party where more drinks will be proffered them.

Supporters of Fine Gael and Labour, among others, object to the manner in which the king curries the favor of Fianna Fail representatives and campaigns for the party. He is accused of using illegal tactics, such as haranguing voters outside of the school as they enter to cast their ballots, in his endeavor to keep Fianna Fail in power. A more serious charge related to this one is his opposition to change in Inis Beag which might benefit the population as a whole, an opposition which explains his support of political party and church—both conservative forces. It is asserted that, just as the government wants to preserve the Gaelic language and supposed Celtic virtues of the folk and the church their strength of belief and morality and thus underwrite the *status quo*, the senior publican wants no changes which might threaten his economic position and control over the lives of the islanders. To this end, he is thought to use his influence with priests and politicians who are in a position to modify local conditions.

Absent from Inis Beag is the evening *cuaird* of old men, which plays such a decisive role in the political and social life of villages on the mainland. It is a clique of visitors who usually convene at a particular home, called the "old men's house," to formulate local policies.

> Much of the community's relation to the outer world is debated here and determined by the old men's agreement. . . . It is here that petitions for roads, for relief work in winter, for extension of agricultural prise schemes, and all of the "political" business of the county council and its committees originates on the side of the local community. It is here too that the community reaches its unanimity in party voting. . . . Here it is too that the community makes its appraisal of its own members and those with whom it is in contact. And that appraisal tells quite heavily in the behavior the community will adopt toward the person or